

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 002433

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/28/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPT:MASSIVE POLICE DEPLOYMENTS PARALYZE CENTRAL CAIRO, THWART SMALL DEMONSTRATION

REF: A. CAIRO 1413

[1](#)B. 04 CAIRO 8353

Classified by Acting ECPO Counselor Al Magleby for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

-----  
Summary  
-----

[1](#)1. (C) On March 27, one of the largest security operations in recent years paralyzed Central Cairo for hours. Thousands of police troops in riot gear thwarted the attempt of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), accompanied by a smattering of leftists, to stage a demonstration either at the parliament building or nearby Tahrir Square to press for "real political reform." Ultimately, the demonstrators, scattered in several clusters around town, were unable to join forces and eventually dispersed. Their total probably did not exceed 200-300. Approximately 70 of the demonstrators were detained, most following scuffles with police on Qasr al-Ayni Street, one of central Cairo's principal north-south arteries. Among those detained was Abdel Moneim Aboul Fettouh, a member of the MB's Guidance Bureau, but he and others were released within a few hours. Mahdy al-Akef, the MB's Supreme Guide, claimed to an Egyptian daily that the GOE had granted, and then belatedly retracted, permission for the demonstration. A senior GOE official asserted to poloff that the police's massive show of force was not disproportionate to the modest number of demonstrators. The GOE also reportedly intends to ban a demonstration by the active but small group "Enough" proposed for Wednesday, March 30. End summary.

-----  
Precautions Prompt Gridlock  
-----

[1](#)2. (SBU) Starting in the early hours of March 27, thousands of troops from the Ministry of Interior's Central Security Forces deployed to positions around central Cairo. By mid-morning, the troops sealed off many of the city's major arteries, especially those leading toward the parliament building or Tahrir Square, the expected rallying points for demonstrators organized by the MB. In so doing, security forces essentially paralyzed much of the city, causing traffic snarls that stretched out for miles.

[1](#)3. (SBU) A March 27 walk through central Cairo revealed thousands of riot police, but no demonstrators. The demonstrators, who apparently did not total more than 200-300, were blocked some distance from the parliament and Tahrir Square, in three main clusters: One near the bottom of Qasr al-Ayni Street, about 2 miles south of the parliament; one at Ramsis Square, about 3 miles north of the parliament; and a third group in Dokki, on the west bank of the Nile. Most of the drivers observed by poloff had shut down their car engines and were reading newspapers and chatting alongside their vehicles. Pedestrians were even prevented from crossing Qasr al-Ayni Street, the major thoroughfare near the parliament. The traffic logjam only began to break late in the afternoon. At no time did the demonstrators approach the Embassy or constitute a threat to mission personnel. Host government security forces augmented the normal heavy police presence around the Embassy.

[1](#)4. (C) The demonstrations had been called by the MB in the wake of several well publicized but small demonstrations by "Kifaya (Enough)" a loose coalition of regime opponents ranging from communists to Islamists. The intent of the MB had apparently been to make its presence known and advertise its political program of "fighting corruption," promoting "political reform," and reiterating its staunch rejection of "Zionism and U.S. imperialism." Nonetheless, it appears the MB never intended to stage a major show of force, such as when it turned out over 100,000 demonstrators for a state-sanctioned and tightly controlled anti-war demonstration in February 2003. (See Ref B for an overview of recent MB developments.)

[1](#)5. (C) MB Supreme Guide Mahdy Akef claimed to the independent daily Al-Masry Al-Youm that permission for the demonstration had been granted by the Ministry of Interior and then belatedly retracted. (Comment: MOI has granted the MB permission to demonstrate before, but would never agree to a large demonstration in the center of town. While we cannot

verify Akef's claim, it would track with the fact that apparently only a few hundred demonstrators turned out. End comment.)

16. (C) By late afternoon, multiple sources reported that 65-70 demonstrators had been arrested. Most of the arrests apparently took place on Qasr al-Ayni Street, where scuffles were reported between police and demonstrators. Among those arrested on Qasr al-Ayni were Abdel Moneim Aboul Fettouh, a member of the MB's Guidance Bureau (a sort of "governing council" for the group). Though the GOE periodically arrests MB cadres, most are from the middle to lower ranks of the group. If detained and/or prosecuted, Aboul Fettouh's arrest would have constituted a significant escalation in the GOE's cat-and-mouse game with the MB, but he, and other detainees, were released within a few hours.

-----  
A GOE View  
-----

17. (C) In a previously scheduled March 27 meeting, Assistant Minister of Justice Iskandar Ghattas (protect) argued to poloff that the massive show of force by police was not disproportionate, even given the small number of demonstrators. "These people (the MB) are very irresponsible...very dangerous. They want to cause a big problem.... We are dealing with uneducated, illiterate masses.... They can be easily manipulated and incited. We are doing this for your protection...one minute you have a few dozen demonstrators chanting slogans, the next minute half the city will be on fire." Ghattas recalled personal experiences with the 1952 riots in Cairo, when several neighborhoods experienced looting and arson by rampaging mobs, and similar disturbances following a sudden reduction of subsidies on staple foods in 1977.

-----  
"No" to "Enough"  
-----

18. (SBU) Various Egyptian media are reporting on March 28 that the GOE intends to deny permission for a demonstration proposed by Kifaya for March 30. Several recent Kifaya demonstrations, which received ample media attention despite their modest size, have been tolerated (if not authorized) by the GOE (ref A).

-----  
Comment  
-----

19. (C) The MB may have been emboldened by the GOE's tolerance of recent (small) anti-regime rallies by Kifaya. The group may well have miscalculated the GOE's response regarding its own demonstration, but we also cannot discount Supreme Guide Akef's story that the Ministry of Interior belatedly retracted permission. The MB may have also been spurred to stage a public event now by other recent developments. Egypt's political circles have been preoccupied by Mubarak's constitutional reform initiative, announced February 26, which has the potential to permanently alter Egypt's political landscape. It is widely agreed, however, that parliamentarians hammering out the modalities will construct a formula which excludes the MB and other Islamists. The MB also may feel it was dealt a set-back in the recent Bar Syndicate elections, in which the anti-MB President, Sameh Ashour, easily defeated a challenger allegedly backed by the MB. Finally, although wire service reports claimed that several thousand MB members did manage to assemble for demonstrations despite the security cordon, our best information based on local contacts is that the total number of demonstrators did not exceed several hundred. End comment.

Visit Embassy Cairo's Classified Website:  
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/cairo>

You can also access this site through the  
State Department's Classified SIPRNET website.

GRAY